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Editors' Introduction: Cultural Studies and Intersectionality as Intellectual Practice

Stefanie A Jones, Eero Laine and Chris Alen Sula

ABSTRACT As a "critical social theory," intersectionality already lies at the roots of contemporary cultural studies, and the best work in cultural studies has the capacity for or is already engaging with intersectionality as method. This is work that accounts for the multifaceted nature of subjects, institutions, processes, and structures as it asks its questions about cultural objects, experience, ideology, history, or discourses. Intersectionality as, along with dialectical materialism, a core intellectual practice of cultural studies, offers expanded possibilities for political traction, relevance to the world and people's lives, and transformative potential. We see models of such work throughout this issue, including with part two of a special forum on emergent analytics of critical humanities.

We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy. We are socialists because we believe that work must be organized for the collective benefit of those who do the work and create the products, and not for the profit of the bosses. Material resources must be equally distributed among those who create these resources. We are not convinced, however, that a socialist revolution that is not also a feminist and anti-racist revolution will guarantee our liberation....We need to articulate the real class situation of persons who are not merely raceless, sexless workers, but for whom racial and sexual oppression are significant determinants in their working/economic lives.

—Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement"¹

More than just interdisciplinarity, intersectionality is first and foremost an insistence on the importance of always addressing racism and sexism also. The operations of power and oppression, described by women of color feminists eventually under the rubric of "intersectionality," function at the individual, social, cultural, institutional, and structural levels. Turning deliberately in the face of hegemonic interests, intersectionality accounts for and works against the patterns by which certain positions (white, cis-masculine, wealthy/bourgeois, temporarily-able-bodied, Western, heterosexual, citizen) remain preferred, authorized, and enriched today.

Conceived by black feminist thinkers in the 1970s and 1980s, and shaped by subsequent generations of women-of-color feminists, intersectionality is a rich philosophy of both experience and the material world. In 1981, bell hooks traced the origins of black feminist social theorizing to the nineteenth century, examining the theoretical and political work of Anna Julia Cooper, Mary Church Terrell, Amanda Berry Smith, and Sojourner Truth.² Throughout these speeches and writings, and continued significantly in and beyond hooks's work, black feminism engages with a theory of intersectionality, a way of expanding a single-narrative or even an additive frame of oppression into a theory of the

social, cultural, and political-economic world. As Kimberlé Crenshaw demonstrated in the text that coined the term intersectionality, “intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism;”³ As Crenshaw elucidates, intersectionality is a framework meant to replace “single-axis” analysis (such as the sole focus on gender, race, or class) by accounting for multiple forms of oppression at the same time. In so doing, this framework is better able to address the concerns of those who are left out of single-axis analysis (those who occupy intersectional positions, such as women of color oppressed by both racism and sexism simultaneously), as well as the concerns of those who single-axis analysis is designed to address (white women, black men, etc.). Indeed, Crenshaw reveals that single-axis analysis is already intersectional, but that it obscures the ways in which it upholds certain oppressions while challenging one in particular. For example, feminism that does not address women of color does concern itself with both gender and race, but it obscures the fact that it defends white interests while working against patriarchal interests. Intersectionality, then, is a more accurate framework for depicting the multiple forms of oppression that already shape the world. Indeed, Patricia Hill Collins stressed the importance of seeing “black feminist thought as a critical social theory,”⁴ as more than just a reflection of an individual viewpoint. Beyond recognizing a unique individual perspective (though often reduced to that⁵), this school of critical theory is actually the source of a variety of interventions in philosophical considerations of power, capital, and justice. Centering women of color when considering cultural studies questions provides a whole-world view that suggests a radical historicization of power, in conversation with the field’s traditional Marxist roots.

Intersectionality, then, addresses not only the specific lives of black women who have been “socialized out of existence,”⁶ but the specificities of human identities in general as the result of a multifaceted, yet mutually-constituted matrix of relations organized according to various inequitable power distributions. Collins’s insights illuminate this world-organization further: “any matrix of domination can be seen as an historically specific organization of power in which social groups are embedded and which they aim to influence.... Thus, regardless of how any given matrix is actually organized either across time or from society to society, the concept of the matrix of domination encapsulates the universality of intersecting oppressions as organized through diverse local realities.”⁷ Understanding both humans and capital organized according to a complex of material interests (that which Collins calls a matrix of domination) that is historically and locally specific yet that can change over time, this black feminist philosophy challenges false a prioris at the root of previous critical theorizations of power. Taken up and extended in conversation with other feminisms and other antiracist critiques, intersectional critiques are foundational to the tradition of women of color feminism.⁸

Cultural Studies, Marxism, and Intersectionality

bell hooks’s fundamental formulation “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” is a particularly useful approach for cultural studies because it emphasizes the structures that maintain and expand oppression.⁹ As a “critical social theory,” intersectionality already lies at the roots of contemporary cultural studies, and the best work in cultural studies has the capacity for or is already engaging with intersectionality as method. This is work that accounts for the multifaceted nature of subjects, institutions, processes, and structures as it asks its questions about cultural objects, experience, ideology, history, or discourses. On the other hand it is cultural studies’ strength in the practice of dialectical materialism that forms this deep connection with intersectionality. As the world already contains the power inequities that manifest in daily lives as hierarchies of race, gender, sex, class, ability, nation, and sexuality, historical materialism can account for these inequities and hierarchies as they are. And the dialectical practice of historical materialism provides the

capacity for the “both/and” that is so fundamental to accounting for multiple sources of oppression. When deployed with historical accuracy, dialectical materialism cannot help but account for the intersections of a particular cultural object or historical moment in an whole-world way. The canon of cultural studies texts provides numerous examples, most notably from the Birmingham School tradition.¹⁰

This is not to reduce intersectionality to cultural studies; both fields have enough wide-ranging applications to diverge. Nor is it to reduce intersectional thought to Marxist thought; rather it is to recognize that intersectionality is already answering questions that Marxist thinking is asking, often with care and precision for historical reality that exceeds the impact of earlier Marxist scholars, even if the motivation for answering those questions sometimes arises from different places. Moving beyond the base-superstructure division, as much cultural studies has done, already entails a complication of the class-centered (class-only) framework of other kinds of Marxist scholarship. Simultaneously, intersectionality is clear to distinguish that work that is not class-only neither becomes class-exceptional; questions of capital remain inextricably tied to intersectional analyses.

Indeed, this is one of the distinctive strengths of intersectionality as the foundation for contemporary studies of culture. Intersectionality as intellectual practice provides a means to work through some of the contradictions that arise from interdisciplinary work, to move beyond the standstills or counter-productive activities that arise when there are competing interests in work against injustice. Intersectionality as intellectual practice demands a “both/and” response to such points of contradiction. And intersectionality as intellectual practice demands a certain centering of priorities that also works not to reproduce the logics of oppression that form intellectual inquiry itself. What does it mean to fight for justice for black people against the US’s systematic practice of antiblackness (such as police brutality), when faced with critiques of the US itself as delegitimate because of its status as settler colony? The both/and possibilities of intersectionality demand that we imagine justice for both black people and indigenous people simultaneously. Collaborations between American Indian Movement and Black Lives Matter organizers in St. Paul, Minnesota provide a potential model for one kind of intersectional response.¹¹ How do survivors of sexual assault respond to the violence they have endured, intervene in ongoing patriarchal violence, and heal, without recourse to the racialized policing and imprisonment system? Intersectional organizing for transformative justice and community accountability address these contradictions.¹² Two different approaches may each be informed by the specific form of injustice they are combating and thus may be directly at odds; structural intersectionality can provide the common ground from which to begin to imagine alternatives that work productively against injustice from multiple angles simultaneously.

Looking Forward

It is vital to note here that intersectionality as an intellectual practice for cultural studies does not just mean including a chapter on race and another on gender in a book about class and capitalism. To treat Collins’s “critical social theory” with the necessary rigor means recognizing and beginning from the understanding that studies of capitalism are always also studies of white supremacy and the cis-patriarchy.¹³ This may mean disrupting comfortable methodologies, upending traditional research practices, and reorganizing our global and whole-world frameworks so that we begin, informed by updated understandings of existing conditions, to ask new questions (even if those questions are only subtly different).

There are several key challenges facing future work. The first is the emphasis on the material. For example, it requires theoretical nuance and careful work to hold both the constructed nature of race with the material consequences of racial hierarchy, but such balance is necessary to remain specific about historical materiality. While black feminism's intersectionality theory is a uniquely insightful political philosophy, it has not always been utilized in this way. Black feminist scholars have critiqued the way the term has been taken up as a general feminist project without attention to the black women and the feminist anti-racism at its roots.¹⁴ Without addressing the fullness of this as an intellectual and political project, whiteness often subsumes and replaces any women-of-color feminism within intersectionality. When this white-centrism works with the reduction of black feminism from a critical social theory, a philosophical intervention into the nature of the contemporary world, to only a theorization of identity, it loses its capacity for theorizing power and justice in a material way. When used as a superficial celebration of individuality and difference, intersectionality can become imbricated with individualism and American exceptionalism. At times, intersectionality can be used (perversely) to serve rather than subvert hegemonic political interests. And speaking of matter, the material constraints of the academy, in particular its labor demands for legible, pro-capitalist scholarship, are part of disciplining the interdisciplinary cultural studies. Such demands limit which scholars doing which work can succeed, be employed, and receive tenure. In order for intersectional work to thrive, the field must grow. This means more faculty lines and more graduate and undergraduate students in more departments in more institutions dedicated to cultural studies work.

And finally, there are two key challenges regarding points of intersection themselves that we would like to highlight. First, one of the logics by which white supremacy operates is the continued displacement of the question of ending racism, and in particular of ending anti-black racism. We challenge future work in the field to turn against this logic by foregrounding questions of racial hierarchy when considering capitalism, the patriarchy, and heteronormativity. Second, ableism thoroughly shapes the academy. While the digital publication of this journal aids with access in certain ways, the shape of acceptable scholarship and thought production radically restricts the participation of many. While disability justice scholars (often informed by an intersectional feminist tradition, as indeed the divisions of access and ability are deeply informed by and inform race, class, gender, and nation) have done much work on this front, too much remains to be done. We challenge future work in the field to creatively and zealously upend this process of hierarchizing bodies and minds. We believe that these changes are necessary, and that our collective capacity as intellectuals and professionals is vast enough to survive these upheavals.

While there are certain challenges, the rewards are also promising, as this issue attests. Intersectionality as, along with dialectical materialism, a core intellectual practice of cultural studies, offers expanded possibilities for political traction, relevance to the world and people's lives, and transformative potential. We see models of such work throughout this issue, beginning with the second part of the special forum on emergent analytics of critical humanities. As forum editors [Chris A. Eng and Amy K. King](#) note in their [introductory remarks](#), Part I of the forum emphasizes this theory as practice by "placing the intersectional experiences of people's lived materialities at the center of..scholarship and classrooms." The essays and responses of Part II of the forum continue this work. [Sami Schalk](#) and [Jina B. Kim](#) take up critical disability studies, in conversation with [Julie Avril Minich](#). Taking up institutionality along with [Jodi Melamed](#) are pieces by [Leland Tabares](#) and [Tanja Aho](#). [Chad Shomura](#) and [Michelle N. Huang](#) think alongside [Kyla Wazana Tompkins](#) on new materialisms. And, in conversation about settler colonialism with [J. Kēhaulani Kauanui](#), are essays by [Beenash Jafri](#) and [Melissa Gniadek](#).

Our lead article by [andré m carrington](#) does a reparative reading of the small-scale potentials of the graphic novel *Aya of Yopougon*. In this careful approach to understanding *Aya*, carrington demonstrates how the graphic novel subtly renders a past post-colonial Africa and African Diaspora that is playful and diversionary, and that is opposed to overdetermined representations of African societies and Africans in Diaspora. carrington argues that this project of “novelty” shapes the work and shows how *Aya* makes “desirable possibilities” broadly legible in a way that undermines the sedimentation that defines life under neoliberalism.

[Broderick Chow](#) examines the “racialized exclusions of entrepreneurial ideology” through the film series *Magic Mike*. By focusing on how performance hinges together race, capital, sexuality, and bodies, Chow argues that the “magic” of sexual expression and capital enrichment that constitutes male stripping is only possible through the appropriation of black labor.

[Lindsay Weinberg](#)'s article considers target marketing, which segments advertising to consumers according to their demographic data, buying habits, preferences, or location. Attending to the material logistics of the practice, Weinberg argues that target marketing operates as risk management technology rather than uncompensated labor, and serves as a source of monopoly data from which corporations can extract rents. Target marketing saves labor and reduces risk for corporations by providing information that can help capitalists predict user behavior, control consumer choices (especially in ways that reproduce extant power hierarchies), and tailor employment commitments to advance precarity.

[Tania Lizarazo](#), [Elisa Ocegueda](#), [David Tenorio](#), [Diana Pardo Pedraza](#), and [Robert McKee Irwin](#) reflect on digital storytelling in *Sexualidades Campesinas*, a critical public humanities focused on issues of sexual diversity among rural farm workers of California's Central Valley and Central Coast regions. Their essay points to “the ‘multivoicedness’ of digital narratives, alluding to the intersectionality and instability of identity (e.g. lesbian/farmworker/mother/Mexican immigrant)” and questions the academic-public divide that pervades much scholarship.

Notes

1. Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement” in Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2015), 214. [↗](#)
2. bell hooks, *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1981). [↗](#)
3. Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 140 (1989), 140. [↗](#)
4. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 31. [↗](#)
5. See, for one recent example, Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (New York: Verso, 2013). [↗](#)
6. hooks, *Ain't I A Woman*, 7. [↗](#)
7. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 228. [↗](#)
8. Some key foundational texts include Barbara Smith, *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983); Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2015); INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, eds., *Color of Violence: The Incite! Anthology* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press,

2006); and Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1982). [↗](#)

9. hooks, *Ain't I A Woman*, 190. This text is the first of hooks's to explore this term, which appears and is expanded throughout hooks's oeuvre. [↗](#)
10. Such as Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, and Brian Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (Hong Kong: Macmillan Press, 1982); and Hazel V. Carby, *Cultures in Babylon: Black Britain and African America* (New York: Verso, 1999). [↗](#)
11. At a July 8, 2016 rally for Philando Castile in St. Paul, MN, Black Lives Matter Minneapolis activists discussed how the American Indian Movement provided community security for their events and actions after a well-publicized violent attack by white supremacists made community members afraid to attend. Mark Vancleave, "Five People Were Shot Near Black Lives Matter Protest Site," *Star Tribune* November 24, 2015, accessed May 15, 2017 <http://www.startribune.com/several-people-were-shot-near-black-lives-matter-protest-site/353121881>. [↗](#)
12. Mariame Kaba, "Transformative Justice," *Prison Culture*, March 12, 2012, accessed May 15, 2017, <http://www.usprisonculture.com/blog/transformative-justice>. [↗](#)
13. See, for examples of this work, Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1983); and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007). [↗](#)
14. For this analysis, see Patricia Hill Collin's talk "With My Mind Set on Freedom: Black Feminism, Intersectionality and Social Justice" given on receipt of the Gittler Prize, October 29, 2013, Goldfarb Library, Brandeis University. Hazel Carby also notes in another critique: "The cultural, political, and social complexity of black people is consistently denied in those strands of feminist and multicultural theory that emphasize 'difference' and use it to mark social, cultural and political differences as if they were unbridgeable human divisions." Carby, *Cultures in Babylon*, 249. [↗](#)

[Bio](#)



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SAJ is a McNair scholar, an organizer, and an educator, and received their doctorate from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. SAJ has published in edited collections and *Theatre Journal* and has taught at Brooklyn College, Hunter College, the College of Staten Island, Marymount Manhattan College, and New York University. SAJ's research explores war, white supremacy, twenty-first century capitalist economies, and the connections between class formation and political practice.

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